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## Goldstone

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# Goldstone

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Goldstone* (2015), directed by Ivan Sen.

## **Author Notes**

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and since 2012 he has been the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***Goldstone***

Directed by Ivan Sen

2015

Australia

110 minutes

TIFF Platform Program

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/N0QUupvaXH0>

*Goldstone* is the second feature by Ivan Sen about Australian Aboriginal police detective Jay Swan, after 2013's *Mystery Road*.<sup>1</sup> Once again Swan finds himself in a small rural town, trusted by no one, looking into a case involving sex, corruption, and settler-Indigenous relations. As in the first film, Swan's actions eventually lead to a huge gun battle. Also as before, his investigation centers on a young woman—but one who is missing, not murdered. This situation presents the detective with the first big stumbling block of the case: as the local cop, Josh, reminds him, if there's no body there's no crime.

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<sup>1</sup> "By Ivan Sen" in this case means a lot more than usual. Amazingly, Sen not only directed both films but was also responsible for the writing, editing, cinematography, and music.

There are of course many other obstacles to Jay's investigation. These include Josh himself, who like almost everyone else is unfavorably disposed towards Jay; Johnny, the Furnace Creek Mine boss; and Tommy, corrupt head of the local Aboriginal Land Council. Most importantly there is Maureen, the town mayor and matriarch. Maureen is arguably the most overtly evil character in the film, with her warm smile and her cold-blooded willingness to have people bribed or killed as circumstances require. In this respect she presents an interesting spin on the traditional femme fatale: instead of tempting men with sex and power, she offers them home-baked pies and motherly advice.

In some ways the most important problem that Jay must address is his own personal crisis. At the start of this film he is struggling with the conclusion of the previous one, with the violence in which he was engaged at the end of *Mystery Road*. He is estranged from his wife and teenage daughter, drinks too much, and appears almost entirely directionless. His commitment to justice – particularly for the lost and disenfranchised – remains unwavering, however, and seems to be what keeps him moving as he slowly comes to understand what happened to Mei, the lost young woman who was last seen in Goldstone.

As much as Jay finds value in pursuing his case, the key to him more fully regaining his sense of meaning and belonging is local Aboriginal elder Jimmy. Jay is shocked to learn that Jimmy knew his father who, it seems, was part of Australia's "Stolen Generations," one of possibly more than 100,000 children who were removed from their families by the government. Jimmy also takes Jay in a dugout canoe through a landscape that is filmed to suggest timelessness, a world away from the selfishness and corruption of Goldstone. The landscape includes traditional Aboriginal rock paintings, which often use an aerial perspective to depict creation events connected to that specific place and to the ancestors

who lived there. The fact that Jay's father is also from this place means that Jay has, unexpectedly, come home. As Jimmy's daughter Maria tells him: "This land, you belong to it."

Another aerial perspective is provided by a particular type of drone shot that is repeated throughout the film. Often we are looking at the action from high in the air, with people framed as very small against a huge, seemingly endless landscape. In his remarks after the TIFF screening, Ivan Sen explained that in part these shots are meant to highlight the straight lines and artificial structures that colonists have imposed on nature. They also offer a view that could be seen as traditionally Aboriginal, a view that people are in fact just a very small part of the world.

Significantly, the corruption in *Goldstone* is driven by a very different, very *colonial*, view of the land. This view is most obviously represented by the mining company itself, which sees no value in the earth beyond the resources – in this case, gold – that must be extracted with violence. Johnny explicitly asserts that without the mining company Goldstone would be "nothing," just like when only the Aboriginals lived there. Maureen even blames her own callousness, and that of her father and grandfather, on the land. All of them were "hard," she says, like the earth they grew up on. Maureen and Johnny cannot understand how anyone can value the earth on its own terms, how they can reject individual gain and wealth for the sake of a meaningless hunk of dirt. Of course this is exactly what Jimmy does when he walks away from the signing ceremony that would allow the mine to expand. And it's a thought that starts to cross Tommy's mind when he sees how the company's operations have hurt his world.

Sen has referred to his Jay Swan films as “Outback Noir.” Like traditional film noir, *Goldstone* does not end happily in several ways. While Jay (and Josh) have some success, the biggest villains go unpunished, and many good people are hurt or killed. The picture of life that the film paints is bleak in many ways. Despairing of ever being able to overcome the cruelty of her dead-end existence, one character laments, “The world is what it is. You cannot change it. You cannot bargain with it.” Referencing the events of *Mystery Road* and trying to justify not doing anything about the problems in his town, Josh himself says that all Jay really accomplished was to kick up a lot of dust that just settled down again. The movie clearly sides with Jay, though, who responds that at least there was a little less dust to settle. This is, it seems, one of the Aboriginal twists that Sen is putting on traditional noir. When we think only of ourselves, things will inevitably end badly for everyone. When we think of others, though, when we recognize our true *place*, our actions can have some small, but real, value. We may not be able to do much, but this is more than nothing.